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Brunelleschi in Competition with Ghiberti

BY FERN RUSK SHAPLEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLARENCE KENNEDY

It would not be a very gross exaggeration to say that Ghiberti's little competitive panel in the Bargello has been of more interest to historians of Renaissance art than have his great bronze doors themselves. For there beside it hangs the companion relief by his rival Brunelleschi. Because of their immediate juxtaposition the two reliefs, composed at the same time and subject to the same requirements of size, shape, border design, depth of relief, material, and purpose, offer a unique opportunity to observe the infinity of great and slight differences in the treatment of the same theme by different hands and to discover the subtler, as well as the more striking, peculiarities of the artists' styles. The decision of the judges in 1403 is, furthermore, an instructive commentary on Florentine taste at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Without any stretch of the imagination, the student of today can review the case entire, as far as Ghiberti and Brunelleschi are concerned, and see the significance of the judgment rendered.

At first sight, it must be confessed, the choice between the two seems comparatively easy. For what is first grasped, the composition (Pl. XII), is far more distinguished in Ghiberti's panel, with its less confusing, more architectural, upright lines, and its greater harmony between figures and setting. A little further familiarity, however, makes the recorded difficulty of the original judges intelligible. Brunelleschi's relief reveals, indeed, unexpected richness of motive and liveliness of action; also it seems more finished and mature than Ghiberti's. But these are impressions, again, that we get rather from the general arrangement and effect of the compositions than from any thoroughgoing examination of the details; ordinarily, in fact, we are unable to study the details, so inadequate are the reproductions upon which we have to depend.

For these reasons, the readers of *The Art Bulletin* will welcome the beautiful heliotypes of particular parts of the competitive reliefs which have been produced from unique negatives carefully made for the purpose by Mr. Clarence Kennedy. Mr. Kennedy's photography is a revelation of what can be accomplished by a competent photographer who has in addition the background of an archæological and artistic training. It is not only that he photographs details but that he is also at pains to choose those details which, apart from their own artistic merit, are most representative and significant. He takes a piece of sculpture, even though it be a relief as these rival panels, from various angles, and thus he succeeds in actually conveying on the flat surface of the photographs what an observant eye would get when looking at the three-dimensional original itself, namely, a series of images from those chosen vantage points which, whether for the contours, the foreshortening, the proportions, or other bodily quality they reveal, are specially characteristic of the sculpture under consideration. Above all, he is extremely solicitous about the lighting and aims to bring out the finest gradations of modelling; the justly regulated play of light and shade over the surface makes the photographs better for certain lines of study than are the originals when seen, as they regularly are, under a somewhat fortuitous, less favorable illumination.



FLORENCE, BARGELLO: THE TWO SERVANTS FROM THE BRONZE COMPETITIVE PANEL BY Ghiberti

In the case of the competitive reliefs we may compare from our plates certain details more conveniently than in the Bargello itself. For instance, we have here together on one plate (Pl. XIII) the head and arms of Abraham from each relief with no appreciable deviation in scale from the originals. This juxtaposition seems to bring into a single field of vision the Classical and the Gothic worlds. Zeus, as the Periclean Greeks conceived him, powerful and irresistible, but quiet and self-contained, is matched against the biblical patriarch of the Middle Ages, nervous and fiery, acting upon the impulse of the moment. In Ghiberti's Abraham the great masses of hair and beard, the broad, full waves of drapery, the steady, sure gaze of eye and movement of arm suggest the mighty ocean with its continuous surge and roll of billows. In Brunelleschi's Abraham the spiral locks, the sharply overlapping drapery, the intensity of expression, and the darting thrust of arms suggest the swirling whirlpool.

One could go further and say that this great contrast, a contrast which is intrinsic to the art of the early Renaissance, is present even in Ghiberti's Abraham. The flying corner of his mantle would certainly indicate hurried movement were not the rest of his drapery (Pl. XV) arranged in quiet, elegant folds. Artistically explicable the waving corner becomes by a glance at the whole relief (Pl. XII). It serves to emphasize the line of action of Abraham's menacing arm, and to point like a tongue of flame toward the absolved sacrificial ram. It serves with the heavy drapery that hangs down from the other shoulder to square up the silhouette of the curving figure, and, by its fading away into the background, to give the figure greater salience: in these respects it counteracts its own Gothic nature. It serves between the angel and the ram to occupy partially an otherwise sensible lacuna and adds concessively a touch of bravura. Naturalistically explicable the waving corner is not, unless we imagine that despite the apparent calm elsewhere it has been caught up by a passing breeze.

No such fortuitous passing breeze accounts for the streaming drapery in Brunelleschi's panel. Here all of Abraham's robes are thrown back violently as he rushes forward; we can almost hear them snap behind him (Pl. XII). And the angel, flying in from the opposite direction, has its drapery swept back toward the other side of the panel (Pl. XIV). So we have the effect of a whirlpool created here in a more literal fashion: the three arms seem to be sucked into the center, marked by Isaac's head, while the ends of drapery and the angel's other hand and wings are flung outward by the centrifugal force at the periphery.

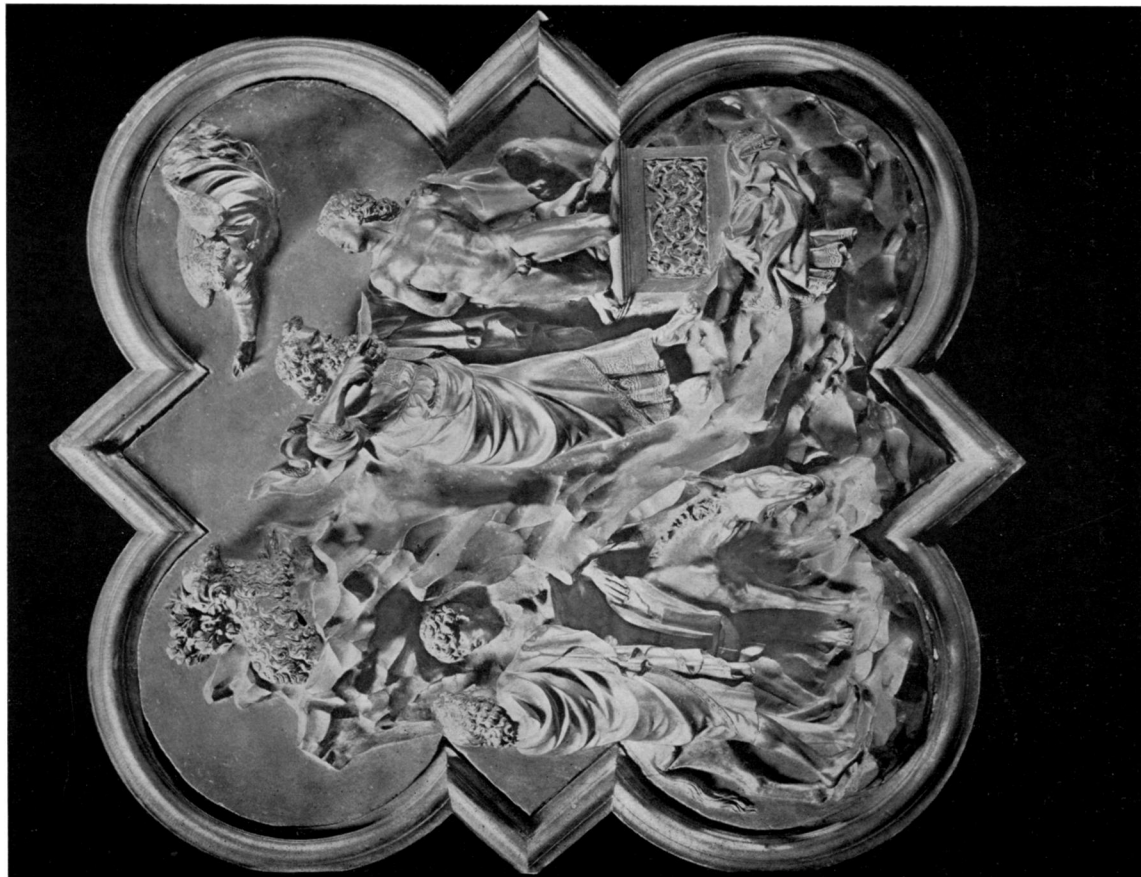
Brunelleschi revels in action. He could not be content with merely preparing the stage, having things ready to happen; they must happen. Abraham is actually plunging the knife into Isaac's throat. Isaac struggles, screams out in agony, and assumes a look of despair, as if in the very act of expiring. The angel dares not wait to convince Abraham with words; his only hope of saving Isaac lies in grasping the arm of the desperate father and halting him instantly. In the next moment Abraham would be thrown backward were it not that his own rush forward, added to the heavy bulk of his body, is sufficient to equalize the impact of the angel.

Ghiberti, less interested in rapid action, gives each figure a pose it could retain independently of the others, just as Classical architecture has no need of Gothic thrust supports. Here all preparations have been made for action (Pl. XV). Abraham feels no indecision, but he is slower and more deliberate, so that the angel, coming forward and hovering over the scene, needs but to indicate the ram with one graceful hand, while he holds his drapery in place with the other. Isaac does not cry out and struggle; he shrinks back in surprise and turns an innocent, inquiring look toward his father.

The relation of both sculptors to the antique has been frequently discussed.



FLORENCE, BARGELLO: SACRIFICE OF ISAAC, BRONZE COMPETITIVE
PANEL BY BRUNELLESCHI



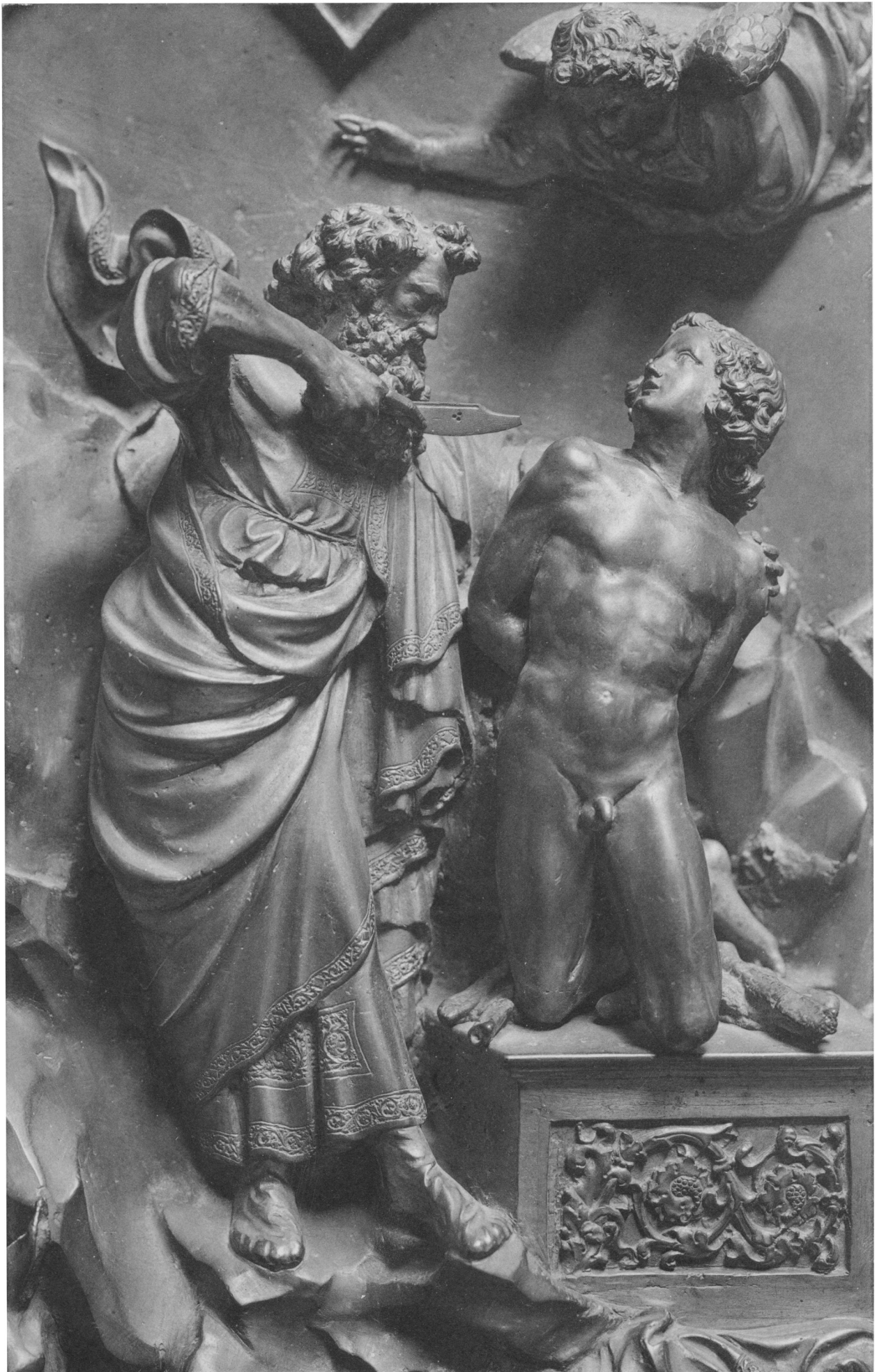
FLORENCE, BARGELLO: SACRIFICE OF ISAAC, BRONZE COMPETITIVE
PANEL BY Ghiberti



FLORENCE, BARGELLO: DETAILS FROM THE BRONZE COMPETITIVE PANELS BY BRUNELLESCHI (above) AND Ghiberti (below)



FLORENCE, BARGELLO : THE ANGEL FROM THE BRONZE COMPETITIVE PANEL BY BRUNELLESCHI



FLORENCE, BARGELLO: ABRAHAM AND ISAAC FROM THE BRONZE COMPETITIVE PANEL BY Ghiberti

Brunelleschi copied the spinario for one of his servants, an apoxyomenos, apparently, for the other; his head of Isaac might have been suggested by some head on Trajan's column, and his ram stands in a conventional antique pose, rubbing its head with its hoof. But in spite of his objective imitation of the antique in these particulars, Brunelleschi has much less of the Classic spirit than has Ghiberti.

Schlosser, indeed (Austrian *Jahrbuch*, 1904, p. 151), alleges a certain similarity between Ghiberti's Isaac and a colossal torso of a satyr now in the Uffizi which according to an old and persistent, though not absolutely reliable, tradition belonged to Ghiberti's collection. Our plates (XV and XVI) are excellent for studying the Isaac, and the analogy, like so many others, vanishes upon closer acquaintance: the torso (reproduced on *Tafel* 29 of the Brunn-Bruckmann series) is a very deeply modelled, superanatomical, Pergamene piece, which the Isaac does not resemble in pose, proportion, or surface, the two having in common, however, a vague suggestion of the Praxitelean. But whether Ghiberti copied or not, and as far as we know he did not, he did approach ancient sculpture more closely through a sensitive refinement of form and contour than Brunelleschi did by catching at externals.

Our reproductions are most satisfactory for showing the artists' peculiarities of modelling. The broad, smooth surfaces in some parts of Brunelleschi's plaque—for example, the angel's sleeves and the mantle over its shoulder—remind us of Giotto. The sense of solidity produced by such treatment is remarkable here as in Giotto. The flesh, too, is worked out in the same manner. See how hard the flesh of Abraham's arm looks; the tendons and veins are indicated with the fewest, simplest lines and changes of surface projection. And a few bold ridges and indentations mark the character of the face. How different is the ever-changing surface of the face and arm of Ghiberti's Abraham! The play of light and shade over the gentle modulations gives the effect of a softness of texture. Our plate showing the full-length group of Abraham and Isaac (Pl. XV) gives a good opportunity for studying Ghiberti's distinction between various materials. Flesh, hair, drapery, boots, rock, firewood—each has its peculiar texture. But with Brunelleschi the distinction is not so clear. Abraham's hands and arms have the hard, metallic look we mentioned above, and the drapery, in spite of the folds, seems of a very hard, stiff material, scarcely distinguishable from the flesh. The angel's hand issues from a metal cylinder instead of from a soft textile. The hair is of the same brittleness. One must recognize, however, that this kind of treatment is in perfect harmony with the spirit of Brunelleschi's panel. No soft-fleshed race would display such irresistible vigor. This is a race of hardened, brawny men of action. No wonder critics propose to see in the figure of the servant at the right (Pl. XVII) a copy of an ancient statue of an athlete and no wonder this same figure seems to presage the soldiers in Michelangelo's Battle of Pisa cartoon. The servant is merely stooping to fill his drinking shell with water; but, suddenly startled by a glimpse of the tragic action so near him, he is shot through by an electric signal that tightens every nerve and muscle. In the next moment he will spring up, dash away his cup, and leap to the ledge above.

This servant's counterpart on the opposite side of the panel is still oblivious to the tragedy. He is, as everyone knows, a copy of the Classical spinario. It is interesting to compare the figure with Ghiberti's Isaac (Pl. XVI). But how different the two are! And neither would ever be mistaken for a Classical piece. Brunelleschi has given the spinario the sweet face of a Gothic angel, with just the suggestion of a smile playing about the lips, and he has clothed the figure in a heavy mantle, that falls in large, beautiful folds. Ghiberti has taken great delight in studying the torso of his Isaac. There is

something here that we do not find in Classical work; there is a greater interest in the minutiae of detail, a less summarized record of the changes wrought in the surface by the bones, muscles, and tendons beneath. The side view of the figure that we have in Pl. XVI is very instructive. It shows the care with which these artists finished their work—they did not send in to the critical judges of the competition a sketch, but a finished work that (apart from a few hasty details, like the foot of the boy behind the donkey in Ghiberti's relief) would stand the closest scrutiny. It illustrates, too, what was said above in regard to the self-sufficiency of the various figures in Ghiberti's plaque. But for the hand of Abraham on the shoulder, the figure of Isaac might almost stand alone as an independent statuette. Mr. Kennedy has shut out the rest of the relief with a curtain so that we may appreciate more fully the exquisite outlines of the body and the appealing expression of the face.

Another interesting comparison is offered by our plate showing Ghiberti's ram and Brunelleschi's donkey's head (Pl. XVIII). Ghiberti's little animal is calm and gentle, with a suggestion of humble obeisance in the slight turn of the head. Brunelleschi's, with the swift, straight lines of neck, head, ears, and leg converging toward a single point, has much of the lithe strength and animation which characterize the human figures of this plaque. And for masterly modelling this is one of the finest details that either panel can offer. One may prefer Ghiberti's more detailed modelling in the case of such a figure as the Abraham or the Isaac, but for the sleek head of a donkey, with its prominently marked skull, one could imagine no better technique than this broad, almost cubistic manner that catches and emphasizes the important planes.

If we would see in the animal head and in the servant stooping down beside it the sculptural accomplishment of Brunelleschi at its best, we may take the group of two servants (Pl. XI) in the other panel as no less representative of Ghiberti's genius. After such colorful work as this, one could be surprised at no limits to which the sculptor might go in pictorial treatment. How elegant and graceful is this beautifully draped figure, and how mysterious and suggestive the face of the other! Ghiberti is here not at the beginning of the Renaissance but at its apogee. His art has become personal, lyric, introspective.¹ The boys—near Ghiberti's own age—look intimately, soulfully into each other's eyes. They seem Giorgionesque already. They remind us of the two youths in similar communion in the famous *Fête Champêtre*. Brunelleschi tells his story with strong, clear-cut lines. Ghiberti leaves something for us to imagine in the deep shadows and softly undulating modelling. What a problem for the Florentine judges!

¹A true reflection of the artist as he remained to the end and portrayed himself in the famous medallion, which Mr. Stites has adapted for the cover design.



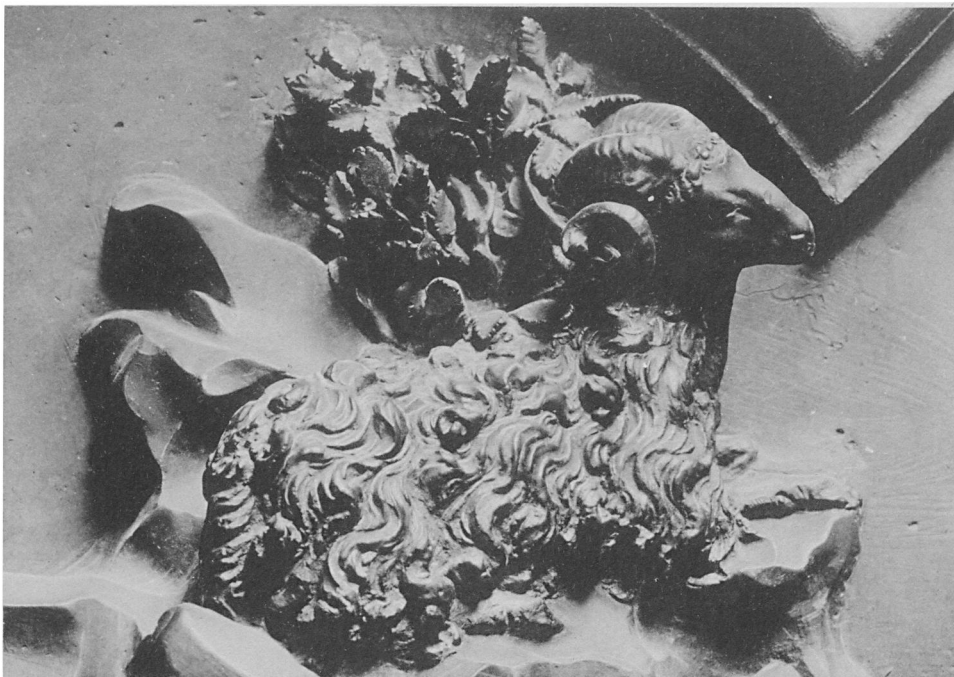
FLORENCE, BARGELLO : ISAAC FROM THE BRONZE COMPETITIVE PANEL
BY Ghiberti



FLORENCE, BARGELLO : A SERVANT FROM THE BRONZE COMPETITIVE PANEL
BY Brunelleschi



FLORENCE, BARGELLO : THE ANGEL FROM THE BRONZE COMPETITIVE PANEL BY BRUNELLESCHI



FLORENCE, BARGELLO: DETAILS FROM THE BRONZE COMPETITIVE PANELS BY
GHIBERTI (above) AND BRUNELLESCHI (below)